

“Are you playing me?” Tristan yelled into the featureless gray sky instead of at the glowing dome before him. He’d always looked up when commenting to his tormentor, and even within this landscape of the Source, it felt natural to do that.

“Well?” he demanded. He raised a hand to the sky, and he was holding an old book. “Are the promises in this even real, or just to get me here so I could rescue these people?”

He threw it at the dome, but instead of exploding and sending paper everywhere, it ceased to exist as soon as it left his hand. He growled. The gesture held no satisfaction without the destruction.

“Did you think I wouldn’t come unless you tricked me? You think I can’t save people if you tell me to? It’s what I do. People who find me pay me to do whatever horrible work they need done. Do you think I’d consider saving them below me?”

He waited.

This time, he would out wait it.

This time, it would break the silence.

“Is it lie?” he asked, his voice breaking. “If I’m going to do this for you, don’t I at least deserve to know that? To know that this will end with him being cured?”

And again, it won the battle of will. He knew better than to try. It was everything. How could he hope to win?

Like he’d let that stop him. How often had he found himself in situations he shouldn’t have won? The universe, the Source, wasn’t out to destroy him, but there had been plenty of people set on his end.

“I’m not being unreasonable. It’s nothing more than payment for the work I’d do.”

Nothing still.

“You can’t expect me to work for free!”

It could expect anything; it was the Source.

“Fine.” But he didn’t have to go along with it.

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He opened his eyes to Alex, winking in the light of the fire. The heat struck Tristan, as did the smell of the roasting meat. He wanted to open the tarp he’d set to block the shallow cavern’s entrance, but he couldn’t risk a slaver wandering about investigating the light.

There had been no indications they were close to an outpost, but they were following a trail left by them over time. It was prudent to expect it to be patrolled.

He wasn’t sure how he’d deal with the situation if he’d been alone. His fur let him stand much colder temperature than Alex, but he didn’t have the thick coat Samalians who lived near the poles did. He’d never had to spend this long in this kind of climate. Other than the year in the jungle, this was the longest he’d spent planet bound for a job.

“Any answers this time?” Alex asked, without looking up from his work. Did he imagine the hint of derision? Alex said he understood Tristan’s desire to connect with his people’s belief, but in spite of evidence to the contrary, Alex claimed he had no interest in those beliefs.

Did he realize the forms he was carving looked to be intertwined? Would he claim, as he did with the others, it was a coincidence they’d look like the lovers once he was done?

“The Source doesn’t tell us which path we need walk on. It simply lays them before

us, for us to decide.” He knew the derision in the tone was thick.

Alex smiled. “Isn’t that what you have your marks thinking?”

“Yes,” he snarled.

“You know, if you share what the question is, maybe I can help you piece together an answer.”

Tristan opened his mouth, but couldn’t decide what to say. Protest Alex couldn’t help? That it wasn’t so important? Tell him everything? Tell him part of it?

The nod his human gave him was resigned.

“It’s not that,” Tristan protested.

“It’s okay. I don’t believe in that stuff so—”

“No.” He saw in Alex’s body language how it wasn’t okay. “I don’t know how to word it for you. The question.”

“Can’t you just word it like you do for the Source?”

And have you ask for details about what ‘the cure working,’ meant? ‘I’m afraid it’s pulling a con on me, us. The details I found that led us here, looking back on them, seem so...”

“Planned?”

Tristan nodded.

“Would the Source work like that?”

“Not according to what I read. It isn’t like us. It doesn’t want anything, except for us to be. It doesn’t set tasks, it offers options.”

“And you’re having trouble accepting that.”

“How can it not want something?” Tristan asked.

“I can’t say.” Alex smiled. “Do you remember telling me how everyone was greedy? Even if it wasn’t always for money?”

Tristan nodded. He remembering touched Alex’s hand and enjoying how his breath had caught with desire. How he’d hidden the pain when the touch was taken away. Tristan had cherished that power over him.

“Can it be greedy for something that doesn’t involve needed anything for people?”

“I don’t know. I never studied it in that direction. I just use it to control people.”

Alex frowned as he looked his work over. It was rough. Alex had become decent over the months of passing the time witling, but he never went beyond the rough shapes with those figures, as if once he noticed enough details to tell what he’d been making, he couldn’t continue.

Four more to go and Alex would have carved all twelve of them.

Would he believe then? Was this his task to accomplish to get his boon, the way the wall had been Tristan’s? Was Alex looking for answers beyond being cured? Was this a path set before him he didn’t understand he was walking?

He put the figure in the pack containing the others.

Did it mean anything Alex hadn’t thrown them away?

“How about we sleep?” he offered, closing the pack. “We can get moving as soon as there’s enough light for me to see.” He moved away from the fire, to the pile of fabric that softened the stone, and Tristan joined him. The heat was less oppressive here and he help his human against him.

He'd do it even if the heat was too much. He has spent too long pushing him away. Never again.

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Tristan studied the structure through the binoculars instead of the settlement sprawling at its foot.

Part of him wanted to call it a cliff, broken and jagged, but it was too regular. They were too far for him to make out details, but the angle, from this high on the mountain looking down into the valley, showed him the galleries, the layers, the perfectly parallel straight lines.

He passed them back to Alex while he thought over what he'd seen.

The furrow in the ground wasn't evident, more of a long depression, instead of broken ground from the impact, smoothed over by time. Centuries? Millennia?

"There's no way that's a ship," Alex said. "They don't make them that big."

"Valhalla class," Tristan said.

"You mean one of the Sovereign ships?" Alex rolled onto his back. "Wouldn't one of them have noticed if it went missing?"

"I don't know. They are insular enough not to keep track of each other."

"But SpaceGov does. Didn't you say they were one of the few things it worried about?"

"SpaceGov tries to keep track of them, but the Sovereign are notorious for not broadcasting. They don't obey any of the rules for space travel. So long as they don't show up within a system withing SpaceGov's jurisdiction, they're happy to let them go about however they please."

"Do you think that's what the infrared sensor registered?"

"It is large enough, and the metal within the hull would react to the magnetic field by heating. That would spread through the rock the ship partially buried itself into." There hadn't been and location data within the sensor information, and before Tristan had thought to do other scans to get some, they'd entered the magnetic field.

"And your book didn't mention it?"

Tristan shook his head.

"Was it written before this happened, or are we so far off we might as well turn around?"

"I don't know, Alex."

His human raised an eyebrow at the sharp tone.

"I have markers, but they need me to see one of them to know how to proceed, and all I know is that they are in a mountain."

"This isn't the only mountain."

Tristan sighed. "I know."

"What about those people living at its base?" Alex make people sound like he was cursing.

"This job isn't about the locals they are enslaving," Tristan said and fought the sense of guild he was betraying the reason he had been sent here. Until the Source answered him, this wasn't its job. He would use his reason for coming, and once Alex was cured, they could consider if helping fight off the slavers was what they wanted to do.

“That’s not what I’m thinking about.” Alex looked over the edge again. “I’m thinking adding layers after layers of the fabric the locals make isn’t going to be enough for long. Even you wearing some isn’t protecting you all that much. These slavers have established themselves here. I see them moving about in pretty thick clothing. Stuff much better made than what we’re wearing.” He handed Tristan the binocular. “If we’re going to go much further north, we need to dress better.”